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ABSTRACT

Ten University of Montevallo (Alabama) students diagnosed as having learning disabilities were interviewed concerning their feelings about being labeled learning disabled, their strategies for coping with the disability, their outlook for the future, advice for other learning-disabled students, and services offered by the university. Eight of the students felt that the term "disabled" was inappropriate to describe their situation, and preferred such terms as learning style difference or learning problem. Nine of the subjects saw both advantages and disadvantages to labeling students, with disadvantages revolving around misunderstanding of the label. All of the students admitted to some form of problem encountered in college, primarily personal difficulties and problems with teachers or studying. Students' coping strategies and advice to learning-disabled high school and college students are noted. The open-ended set of questions used in the interviews and sample responses are presented in appendices. Includes nine references. (JDD)

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LABELING LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The American Council on Education (1987) found that there has been a steady increase in the number of college applicants with learning disabilities. Because of this, colleges and universities must now find some way to implement programs to aid these individuals without downgrading the quality of the institution. Even though there is abundant literature on intervention with the K-12 student, there is little research to guide the postsecondary provider (Ryan & Heikkila, 1988). Adding to the difficulty, intervention should be accomplished without discriminating against those students with learning disabilities. Institutions should be careful not to let the term "learning disabled" separate these students from the regular university curriculum.

The transition from a high school setting, which has many helpful resources (e.g. separate classes, departments specifically for learning disabled students, direct teacher intervention, etc), to a college setting, which has very little direct intervention, is very difficult for learning disabled students. They must learn to adapt to the individual demands that colleges place on individuals. There are several problems that both the learning disabled students and the institution must overcome. There is a great deal of work that the students must do before entering college. Cowen (1988) states, "Coping with a learning disability in a college or university setting with no special services would require an active, adaptive process of managing oneself in relation to the competitive learning environment" (p 161). This is true even if special services are available. These habits can help

the learning disabled student cope with the difficulties that will be faced on the college level.

Labels, which may be necessary, sometimes lead to problems for learning disabled students. There are several myths and misconceptions that are sometimes associated with the label. Ryan & Heikkila (1988) mention several of these misconceptions. The first is that on a college level the student with a learning disability is looked upon as an older version of a learning disabled high school student. The truth is that, although the disabilities continue, the symptoms may change as the student matures, and the student also learns to use previously unknown strengths. A second misconception about learning disabled students is the belief that college entrance information can predict which learning disabled students will be successful in their college endeavors. Most admission requirements cannot accurately identify the qualities that will help a learning disabled student succeed. Two other misconceptions are interrelated. The first is that students let people know about their handicaps. The second is that if they do, the college or university does not have programs to help them. Many schools do have programs to help, but the stigma surrounding the label causes many students to refrain from informing those who can help. They believe the last misconception, that the faculty, staff, and support personnel are not able to help learning disabled college students. These misconceptions can cause the learning disabled student to feel helpless.

As more students come forward and institutions begin to see their responsibility to these students, there will be adaptation and change within the institution. This may help bring an end to the misconceptions found around the words "learning disabled". Also, as these students gain further representation within the student body, they will contribute a better understanding to the world as well as to the university. It should be understood that disabled does not mean unable. The learning disabled students may be delayed in certain areas, but they are not delayed in other intellectual functions. Therefore, they should not be locked away in a curriculum that is remedial and separate from the full school curriculum (Mosby, 1981). To find the effects of the learning disabled label, it is best to go to those who know first hand: the learning disabled students.

METHOD

Subjects

Ten college students who have admitted and been diagnosed as having some sort of learning disability were chosen from the twenty-eight learning disabled students registered at the University of Montevallo. The Director of Education for the Handicapped contacted the learning disabled students. Those who wished to be involved were given an informed consent form to sign.

Procedure

The subjects were questioned orally in personal interviews. The questions fell into six categories:

1. How do you feel about being labeled learning disabled?
2. Do you feel that the labeling process is necessary?
3. How do you cope with your learning disabilities?
4. What is your outlook for the future?
5. What advice do you have for other learning disabled students?
6. What does the University of Montevallo offer to help?

The complete set of questions is listed in Appendix A. This open-ended format was used instead of a set questionnaire. When open to ask questions freely, the interviewer was able to obtain more open responses from the subjects. Blaise (1986) states that "...highly structured survey instruments... may excessively control the research subject's perception" (p. 14). Open ended questions also allow subjects to express their ideas in greater detail (Blaise, 1986). Questions were limited to variations of the questions found in Appendix A. These questions were given in a non-threatening environment to help insure honest and meaningful answers. Also, the subjects were instructed that they could refuse to answer any question(s) they wished, and might terminate the interview at any time (American Psychological Association, 1989). The interviews were tape recorded with the subjects' permission. The results were processed in a qualitative format to allow for personal expression and differences. The nature of this research does not lend itself to a quantitative presentation of the results. The answers were put into categories describing the attitudes, feelings, and ideas

of the labeling process from the learning disabled student's point of view.

RESULTS

Several categories developed from the answers that were given. These categories were (1) Terms other than "disability" that could be used, (2) Labeling advantages and disadvantages, (3) Student problems, (4) Help others might give, (5) Adjustments and coping strategies, and (6) Advice to other learning disabled students. The questions asked did not always directly address these issues. However, the categories emerged from the responses given. Sample responses of the subjects representative of the categories are give in Appendices B-G.

Eight of the ten learning disabled students felt that the term "disabled" was the wrong word to describe their situation (see Appendix B). They feel that the word "disabled" conveys the idea that the person is unable to learn: "I think a disability is something you can't do or that you are unable to perform that task." This is not the case. "An LD is not disabled, they have more of a learning problem." In the students' words, they just have a "learning style difference." "I think learning difference would be better, because you learn in a different way." Learning disabled students have to find "other ways to learn and adapt to it." To take it further they mentioned that everybody with or without a learning disability learns differently and must adapt accordingly.

All of the subjects except one saw both advantages and disadvantages to labeling students (see Appendix C). Six of the subjects mentioned that the label is helpful when dealing with teachers because it "helps them understand" why the student is having difficulty. Five of the subjects thought labeling was useful to the student. They felt that it "helped to know there was a reason" for having difficulty, and that it was necessary to understand the problem and figure out what type of help is needed. The label also made them eligible for federal and university support programs. The disadvantages seemed to revolve around the misunderstanding of the label. Five of the students mentioned this directly. They thought that some teachers did not understand what it meant to be learning disabled, and therefore were unsure of how to help. Two subjects also mentioned that teachers sometimes give up on learning disabled students before they give the students a chance. Two subjects mentioned that students can use the label to get pity or as a crutch when things are not going well. Most of the subjects agreed that labeling was necessary to some degree, but that it must be used with caution.

All of the subjects admitted to some form of problem encountered in college (see Appendix D). Of the 31 problems mentioned, 12 dealt with school and 19 dealt with personal difficulties. The majority of the school problems, eight of the twelve, dealt with problems with teachers or studying. Problems with teachers centered around letting them know about the disability, and again, the teacher's own misunderstanding of the

disability. One subject commented, "I still have difficulty asking teachers" for help. Another stated, "It's always tough to tell a stranger you have problems." Studying led to other school problems. Learning disabled students must "try so much harder to remember things." Some also indicated that "it is frustrating to know that there is a problem." The personal problems dealt with envy, future plans, experiences with bad feelings from other students, misunderstanding their disability, and feelings of inferiority.

The subjects had their own ideas on how to help their situation (see Appendix E). The most popular idea was to teach both teachers and students about all aspects of learning disabilities. Many teachers they encountered were "unsure of how to help." Further training could help alleviate this problem. The students had difficulty understanding what their own problems were. They ask questions like: "What exactly is the problem?" "What caused it?" "What can I do about it?" One subject stated, "They tell you [that] you have a learning disability, but never really tell you what it is... I never really knew what it meant or how to explain it until last year." Other helps included positive thinking and not having expectations that are too high. One subject states, "Focus on what they can do instead of what they can't." Another said to "work with them where they are." Also, a subject felt that the entire disability needed to be helped instead of just the symptoms.

To overcome the difficulties of the disabilities and the everyday stress involved with college, the learning disabled students have made several adjustments and used several coping strategies (see Appendix F). Class work is more difficult for the learning disabled students than other students. Certain adjustments have to be made to overcome these difficulties. Five of the subjects mentioned that they must take a good deal more time than other students to learn material or write papers. More time was needed to take tests, also. To overcome this problem, time management skills were needed. Other techniques to help were chapter outlines, lecture recordings, tutoring, and rewriting notes. Eight of the subjects mentioned the Student Support Services on campus as a source of help.

Along with the needed adjustments to schoolwork, the learning disabled students have had to find ways to cope with the stress involved with college. The coping strategies mentioned were typical of any college student. Prayer, driving, smoking, talking to friends, and other common coping strategies were mentioned. Special strategies such as relaxation training and counseling were also mentioned. Such coping techniques are necessary not only for learning disabled students, but for all college students.

The subjects had a great deal of advice to give to learning disabled high school students as well as learning disabled college students (see Appendix G). All of the subjects agreed that learning disabled college students who are thinking about entering college should "Go for it!" Most of them added that certain

concerns must be remembered. Each subject had precautions to give high school students. Most of them dealt with preparations before the student entered college. The subjects discussed a positive attitude that must be accompanied by a knowledge of one's own limitations. They stressed not to try to do things that are too difficult and to get help. Also, some subjects mentioned that the student should learn good study habits and time management skills. Even though they saw difficulties, all of the subjects recommended college.

The same type of advice was offered to learning disabled college students. Again the subjects stressed positive thinking. They also continued to stress that the students needed to be prepared and that they needed to know their limitations. Again they mentioned that the learning disabled students needed to find help and develop good study habits.

DISCUSSION

As the number of learning disabled college students grows it will be necessary for a greater awareness and understanding of these students to occur among faculty, administrators, and other students. The students interviewed in this study have some definite feelings about the labeling system as well as the disability behind the label. Through the interviews, new ideas and realizations came into focus. There are some definite problems that need to be dealt with, and these students have some solutions to these problems that should not be ignored.

Learning disabled students have a definite problem with the term "disabled." While the label itself may not be dangerous, a false interpretation can be. Although this problem may not be able to be solved, there may be some ways to alleviate some of the problems that the students expressed. They mentioned that the word disabled means "unable" or "not capable of." By letting the students know that they are not viewed as such could help avoid some bad feelings that may occur. Learning disabled students should be given positive outlooks about themselves and their chances in educational settings. They should be supported in their endeavors. This support may require training those teachers and administrators who come in contact with the students. The positive effects would be higher self-esteem and confidence levels for the learning disabled students and a greater sensitivity on the part of the administration and faculty to this type of student.

The more that teachers and administrators understand the disabilities, the better equipped they will be to help these students. Training would also show teachers the capabilities of these students as well as the problems. Since the students have a lack of understanding of the disability itself seems to be a major disadvantage of the label, training for the students may also be necessary. The students need to understand what it means to be disabled. They need to know what they can do to help their situation. Training, such as classes seminars, and workshops, on the college level could help them overcome a great deal of difficulty. By understanding their difficulties they will be

better able to adapt and cope with their problems. Training would also help the students know what adjustments to make in order to make college less frustrating. If the students and faculty can each learn about the problems involved with learning disabilities they can begin to overcome them.

The advice that the learning disabled students have for fellow students shows that they believe it is possible for learning disabled students to go to college. They also have developed, or are developing coping strategies that enable them to do the work that is needed to be done. These students could help learning disabled high school students who are thinking about entering college. They would be able to tell the high school students what to expect and how to prepare for college. The encouragement from this sort of peer group may enhance the high school student's chances of pursuing and doing well in higher education.

Learning disabled students are becoming more prevalent in college and university setting. In order to prepare for this influx, more time needs to be spent on understanding the difficulties and finding ways to help overcome them. Colleges and universities will be called on to provide the support that these students need. These students do need extra help, but most are able to do the work. The support and encouragement of their institution is not only helpful, but imperative. Further study of the relationships between teachers and learning disabled students would give more insight to new ways to meet the needs of both groups.

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Appendix A

Sample Questions

All questions will be limited to these or variations of these questions.

Category I: How do you feel about being labeled learning disabled?

1. Do you view yourself as carrying a label?
2. Has being labeled learning disabled effected your feelings about other students?
3. Do you think this label has effected other students feelings about you?
4. What comments would you like to express about labels?
5. What questions would you like to ask those who may be able to help you?

Category II: Do you feel that the labeling process is necessary?

1. How do you feel about the labeling process?
2. Can you think of any ways to help the student without using the labeling process?
3. Do you feel that labeling students attaches a stigma to the person?
4. Do you see advantages to labeling?

Category III: How do you cope with your learning disabilities?

1. What types of adjustments have you made to overcome your learning disabilities?
2. What coping strategies do you use to overcome the stress involved with college?
3. Do you think college is more difficult for you than any other college student?

Category IV: What is your outlook for the future?

1. What do you want to do after graduation?

2. Do you think that being labeled learning disabled will effect your job chances?

Category V: What advice to you have for other students with learning disabilities?

1. What advice would you give a learning disabled high school student thinking about entering college?

2. What advice would you give a learning disabled college student?

Category VI: What does the University of Montevallo offer?

1. What special programs does the University of Montevallo offer the learning disabled student?

2. How available is this information to a learning disabled student?

3. How did you find out what programs were available?

4. What other programs could the University offer to help the learning disabled student?

5. Did you find it difficult to ask for help?

6. Do you let your professors know about your disabilities?

7. How do you let your professors know about your disabilities?

8. How do they react?

Appendix B

Terms Other Than "Disability" That Could Be Used

"I think a disability is something you can't do or that you are unable to perform a task. I don't see myself that way."

"The word disabled does [attach a stigma to the student,] but you're really not. Just different."

"An LD is not disabled, they have more of a learning problem."

"Disabled means you can't do something. I think difference would be better..."

"[It's] not a disability. It's a difference in learning style."

"Tell them they have a learning style difference instead of a disability."

Appendix C

Labeling Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

"It helped to know that there was a reason I was having difficulty."

"It's necessary to figure out what you need."

"When I'm in a classroom it helps to put a name on it."

"If you are dealing with teachers it is helpful."

"It helps if you have people who don't understand...it help's to have a name to attach to it to help them understand."

Disadvantages

"[Some teachers] seem to give up on the students."

"Labels cause some teachers to judge or show favoritism."

"The labeling process is kind of stupid. It's frustrating to go through the long process in order to get help."

"It's kind of bad...there are people who need help which aren't labeled."

"I think a lot of people who don't understand it try to make concessions for you when it is really not necessary."

Appendix D

Student Problems

"You have to try so much harder to remember things."

"I have a real tough time deciding on my major because of my trouble. It takes me longer to learn things than other people."

"I have to work at everything extra hard."

"I never really knew what [learning disabled] meant or how to explain it until last year."

"I get worn out faster. It takes more energy for me to do work."

"I've had an experience where a teacher wouldn't let me do things that I could do."

"I still have difficulty asking teachers [for help.]"

"It's always tough to tell a stranger you have problems."

"Sometimes I think teachers don't understand what a learning disability is."

"If a student knows they are learning disabled it may keep them from striving for something. They think there is no way they can do it."

"I can't be involved with extracurricular activities because I have to study so much."

Appendix E

Help Others Might Give

"Most of the time teachers are helpful. Sometimes they are unsure of how to help."

"Focus on what they can do instead of what they can't. Let them know that nothing is wrong with them as a person."

"Student Support Services is good with relations between teachers and faculty and they offer helpful programs."

"Work with them where they are."

"I think some of the professors need to be more aware and better educated about learning disabled students."

"Both LD's and those interested need to learn about the disability and what it involves."

"...help more with the disability instead of just the symptoms."

"The faculty and students need to be better educated."

"What is the problem? What caused it? What can I do about it?"

Appendix F

Adjustments and Coping

Adjustments

"I'm real careful with time management. I try to find someone work with me verbally."

"I've had to take extra time for tests and go to tutoring."

"I spend a lot more time with my schoolwork."

"It takes me twice as long [as other students] to write a paper or study."

Coping

"I try to take 20-30 minutes to get away from everything."

"I get in my car and drive around, smoke, and sleep."

"I try not to let myself get too stressed. I manage to stay pretty relaxed."

"My psychologist taught me relaxation techniques."

"I take a lot of study breaks when I get stressed out. I try not to do too much at once. I set goals and reach them before I move on."

Appendix G

Advice to Other Learning Disabled Students

To Learning Disabled High School Students

"Definitely [go to college], but don't take too many classes."

"Don't ignore your problems and study hard otherwise you will never get [to college]. Find out exactly what your problems are."

"Don't think of yourself as disabled."

"Work hard in high school so you know how in college."

"Go somewhere you know you can get help. Know your limitations."

To Learning Disabled College Students

"Don't let the fact that you have a disability get to you."

"Don't give up. Never look at a situation as permanent. Always look ahead."

"Use the resources that are available. Don't over do it."

"Hang in there. It has its ups and downs, but you can't give up."